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ABSTRACT

In order to determine when children distinguish the real from the fictional in television programing, 170 adults and 157 children from 2nd, 4th, and 6th grades were shown 40 "bits" of television, each 5 seconds in length and representative of a wide range of program types. Subjects were asked to classify as real or make-believe 18 "factual" bits, 18 "fictional" bits, and 4 commercials. Findings revealed that even the youngest subjects were able to differentiate clearly fictional from clearly factual material. However, second graders had difficulty with material that was dramatic but realistic, such as evening drama and situation comedies. Fourth and sixth graders were significantly more accurate than second graders in making such judgments. Although second and fourth graders were better able to judge fiction than fact, sixth graders, like adults, were equally good at distinguishing these two dimensions. Results suggest that while children have some ability to distinguish fact from fiction early in life, they appear to develop schema for understanding fantasy before they come to understand the category of factual or real. Judgments of reality are more difficult, take longer, and require a wider knowledge of television and the real world than judgments of make-believe. (Author/RH)

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DISCRIMINATING REAL FROM MAKE-BELIEVE ON TELEVISION: A DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY.*

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Abstract

In order to determine the ability of children compared to adults in distinguishing real from fictional television, 170 adults and 157 children from 2nd, 4th, and 6th grades were shown 40 "bits" of television, each 5-seconds in length, representing a wide range of program types. Subjects were asked to determine for each bit if it was "real" or "make-believe." In all there were 18 "factual" bits and 18 "fictional" bits, and 4 commercials.

Even the youngest subjects, 2nd graders, were able to distinguish clearly fictional (Blatant fantasy) from clearly factual material (News), however, 2nd graders had more difficulty with material that was dramatic but realistic such as evening drama and situation comedies. 4th graders and 6th graders were significantly better than 2nd graders in making such judgments. 2nd and 4th graders were better able to judge fiction than fact, although 6th graders, like adults, were equally good at distinguishing these two dimensions.

These results suggest that while children have some ability to distinguish fact from fiction early in life, they appear to develop schema for understanding fantasy and "make-believe" before they come to understand the category of factual or "real." Judgments of reality are more difficult, take longer, and require a wider range of knowledge of television and the real world than judgments of "make-believe."

Discriminating real from make-believe on television: A developmental study.

Television watching is a stable habit of American children, and it is a habit that occupies approximately 4 hours of each child's day (Condry, Bence, & Scheibe, 1988). What children learn from television, as well as how it effects their thoughts, actions and emotions is partly a function of whether it is perceived as real or unreal. Television has more influence when it is considered real, but this is not a distinction that children are born ready to make; it requires many years of watching and learning. Semiotic analysis of children's comprehension of cartoons emphasizes reality distinctions as central to children's cognitive organization of television messages (Hodge and Tripp, 1986), and many programs of media literacy focus on the fictional nature of television in an attempt to lessen the impact of television on children (Corder-Bolz, 1982; Desmond, Singer, Singer, Calam, & Colimore, 1985; Singer, Zuckerman, and Singer, 1980). Thus children's understanding of the perceived reality of television is an important milestone of social-cognitive development.

The question addressed by this study is how and when does the child develop schema regarding this distinction, and what difference does it make? The consequences of making this distinction are not yet understood completely, but evidence from research indicates that the perceived reality of television can affect behavior, attention, comprehension, and emotional responses. Two orthogonal dimensions of this classification include factuality---"is it true," and social realism---"is it realistic"

(Hawkins, 1977; Wright et al., 1987). The amount of television viewed is positively associated with the judgment of television as "realistic," i.e., heavy viewers of cartoons and violent programs see television as more true to life than light viewers of the same age (Dorr, et. al., 1985); and in one longitudinal study perceived realism of television violence was correlated with aggressive behavior (Huesmann & Eron, 1986). Thus analyses of children's understanding of television's reality are critical to a determination of television's effects.

Perception of Television as Real or Fiction. In the early 1970s, several teams of researchers tried to assess the importance of the perceived reality of television by asking: "Are people on TV just like people in real life? Do the same things happen to people on TV as happen to people in real life? Are places on TV just like places in real life? (Greenberg and Reeves, 1976).

Using this technique several studies demonstrated that children and adolescents placed about mid-point on the scales (Dominick & Greenberg, 1970; Greenberg, 1972; Greenberg & Dominick, 1969; Greenberg & Reeves, 1976; McLeod, Atkin, & Chaffee, 1972a; 1972b, Noble, 1975; Reeves, 1978; Reeves & Greenberg, 1977), and adults score about the same (Dervin & Greenberg, 1972). That is, in answer to the question "is television real?" most children and adults say that it is mid-way between reality and fantasy. It is difficult, however, to make much sense of this answer because the question is too vague and general.

More recent studies have relied on the technique of showing children bits of television and asking for each bit (or character) whether it is real

or pretend. Dorr (1983) suggested three possible ways in which children may attempt to discern whether a particular piece of television programming is real or pretend. a.) They may use knowledge of television production, b.) They may use form cues such as animation, and c.) They may use their knowledge of the real world. Other researchers have identified these same features as important (Dorr, Graves, & Phelps, 1980; Kelly, 1981; Leary, Wright & Huston, 1985; Leifer, Gordon & Graves, 1974; Streicher & Bonney, 1974).

Morison, McCarthy and Gardner (1979) studied first, third, and sixth graders' ability to classify television segments as reality or fantasy, and investigated their explanations for their decision. They found two factors: a willingness to compare television to the "real" world, and an understanding of how and why television programs are put together. Morison, Kelly, and Gardner (1981) found that children's TV-real life comparisons could be broken down into three different types of decisions: a) Does this television object or event exist in the real world? b) Is it possible in the real world? and c) is it plausible or possible. Quite a few studies have shown that young children pay attention to and rely upon form cues (such as animation) to establish the reality of the material (Brown, Skeen, and Osborn, 1979; Leary, et al., 1985; Quafoth, 1979; Skeen, Brown and Osborn, 1982).

Wellman and Estes (1986) studied three, four, and five-year-old children's ability to distinguish between real and mental entitites (between a chair and the thought of a chair), and between real and imaginary things (things that do and don't exist). They found that children

of all ages make few mistakes in a sorting task. Taylor and Howell (1973) studied three, four, and five-year-olds ability to distinguish between pictures of clearly real and clearly pretend characters, finding largely the same thing. One difference was this, while most children make few mistakes about what is real, the youngest children (three year-olds) had some difficulty with fantasy pictures as "things that couldn't happen." This ability to identify fantasy as fantasy increased with age. While these findings seem to be in conflict with those of Wellman and Estes, the differences are probably due to the different tasks used in the two studies, and the wording of the instructions.

Even though children can distinguish real from fantasy, a second question involves whether children actually do so spontaneously. Two studies have investigated children's spontaneous classification of materials into real and fantasy. Morison and Gardner (1978) gave children three sets of pictures that could be sorted on the basis of two fantasy, or one real and one fantasy paired on some other attribute. Although fantasy pairing was never the predominant mode of classification, there was a steady increase with age (from Kindergarten to sixth grade) in the incidence of spontaneous pairing on the basis of fantasy. A second study done by this same research team used television programs and asked first, third, and sixth graders to identify which program pairs were more alike (e.g., is Mike Douglas more like Bewitched or the News?). Spontaneous classifications increased with age, where older children both made more spontaneous real-real and fantasy-fantasy classifications, and gave this dimension as the basis when they explained their actions.

Thus it would appear that during the preschool years children come to learn to distinguish between the dimensions of fact and fiction. They can sort things into real and make-believe, and they do so spontaneously with increasing frequency as they get older. By the age of five, whether something is "real" or not depends greatly on factuality, so that a real person (whether an actor or not) is identified as real and a cartoon is identified as fantasy (Hodge & Tripp, 1986; Jaglom & Gardner, 1981).

As children move into middle childhood, the dimension of importance becomes realism rather than factuality (Wright, Kunkel, Pinon and Huston, 1987). Children are now accurate in distinguishing fictional or nonfactual programs from those showing real world events (Dorr, 1983; Fernie, 1981; Howkins, 1977; Potter, 1982; Morison and Gardner, 1978; Morison, Kelly and Garder, 1981). Most 11 year olds, for example, know that an actor who plays a role does not occupy that role in real life (Dorr, 1985; Hawkins, 1977).

In the age range from 5-12 years, children become increasingly sensitive to production formats that signal whether a program is real or not (Leary, Wright and Huston, 1985). For some program types, such as violence, the perceived realism of the material declines with age (Greenberg and Reeves, 1976; Huesmann, Lagerspetz, and Eron, 1984). For other program types (evening drama) there are no changes with age (Dorr, 1983; Klapper, 1981; Wright, Kunkel, Pinon, and Huston, 1987). And for some program types (family comedies) perceived realism increase with age (Dorr, Kovaric, Doubleday, Sims and Seidner, 1985). The amount of television viewed, in most research, is positively correlated with judging

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television as realistic (Dorr et al., 1985; Greenberg and Reeves, 1976; Hawkins and Pingree,1982; Huesmann, Lagerspetz, and Eron,1984). That is, heavy viewers of all ages see television as more realistic than light viewers.

In most of these studies, children are questioned about the reality of television without being shown actual clips drawn from television programs. Their memory for what has been seen on television is the central component of their responses. In addition, adults are seldom asked to make the same judgment. It is important to know how children judge clips actually shown on television, and whether their judgment of these is comparable to their judgments based on memory. In addition, adult judgments of the same material provides an important basis of comparison.

Method

In order to determine the ability of children compared to adults in distinguishing real clips of television from fictional clips of television, 170 adults and 157 children from 2nd, 4th, and 6th grades were shown 40 "bits" of television, each 5-seconds in length, representing a wide range of program types. Subjects were asked to determine for each bit if it was "real" (e.g. "true: not pretended, imaginary or thought up...not acted."), or "make-believe" (e.g. "imaginary or acted, not real, true, or genuine").

Procedure: Using a large archive of television content, 40 five-second bits were videotaped from television shows recorded during

1987 (for a description of the HDTV Archive, see Condry, 1987; 1989; Condry, Bence, & Scheibe, 1988). In all there were 18 "factual" bits including several items from news reports (both morning and evening news and special reports), talk programs, a cooking show, bits from specials like "The Body Human," and a football game. The 18 "fictional" bits included children's programs with real people, cartoons , programs with puppets, situation comedies, evening dramas, a soap opera. There were also four commercials.

Each "bit" of television was edited onto a separate tape, with each bit numbered for purposes of identification. Subjects were given a sheet with the above definitions of real and make-believe, and with 40 numbered spaces. Adults (students in a University) were shown the 40 bits in a classroom setting, and for each bit asked to determine if it was real or make-believe. Children were also shown the bits in a classroom setting, after a brief discussion of the meaning of "real" and "make-believe." For the children, the videotape was stopped after each bit until all the children in the classroom had responded. This procedure was necessary for the second graders, but was not necessary for 4th, or 6th graders, or adults. Most children responded within a second or two of the beginning of each bit. Once all 40 bits were shown, all questions about the research were answered by the experimenter and the subjects were thanked for participating.[2]

Results

For the sake of analysis, the bits used in the stimulus tape were divided into 5 broad categories of television programs. The fictional material was divided into "blatant fantasy" including cartoons, puppets, and clearly unreal action (such as Wonder Woman), "situation comedies" ("sitcoms") and "dramas." Thus the category of fictional could be arrayed along a continuum of completely unrealistic to more realistic, from blatant fantasy on the one end to evening drama on the other. Similarily, the "real" bits were divided into news and documentary programs, called "informational" and evening entertainment programs such as Johnny Carson and Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. We called programs falling into the latter category "real/entertainment," since while they feature real people being themselves, the object is more entertainment than news. Once again, the continuum is from the realistic to unrealistic, from News on the one end to Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous on the other.

CATEGORY	EXAMPLE
BLATANT FANTASY	THE MUPPET SHOW WONDER WOMAN
SITCOMS	ALL IN THE FAMILY COSBY SHOW
DRAMAS	GENERAL HOSPITAL KNOTS LANDING CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

CATEGORY	EXAMPLE
INFORMATIONAL	WILD KINGDOM NEWS THE BODY HUMAN
"REAL" ENTERTAINMENT	JOHNNY CARSON LIFESTYLES OF THE RICH & FAMOUS

Distinctions between many of these categories are blurred, and there are some bits that don't fit into any category (sports, for example). However, for the purpose of interpreting the data, these categories are useful because they reflect both the category of "real-make-believe" and the category of "realistic-unrealistic." As we shall see, they serve to describe our data as well.

For some categories, there were no developmental differences. Even the youngest subjects, 2nd graders, were able to distinguish the blatant fantasy such as cartoons from the clearly factual material such as evening news programs. For example, 92% of the 2nd graders judged as make-believe programs with animation, puppets, and physically impossible feats (e.g. "Wonder Woman"); and 90% of the 2nd graders correctly identified news and documentaries as real. In both of these categories, 4th graders did almost as well as 6th graders, who were, in turn, not significantly different from the adults in their judgements. These data are displayed in Figures 1 and 2, where percent correct means percent of "real" judgments in Figure 1, and percent of "make-believe" judgments in

Fig. 2. Using the Student Neuman Keuls procedure for comparison of groups, in the analysis of data shown in Figure 1, the 2nd grade group differs significantly (p. <.05) from the 4th grade, but the 4th, 6th grade and adult groups do not differ. The same is true of Figure 2, suggesting limited developmental differences.

-----insert Fig. 1 & 2 about here-----

However, developmental differences were more widespread in two other categories. Second graders seemed to have difficulty with material that contained both real and unreal elements, such as dramas and crime shows. Only 73% of second graders knew that these were fictional. To be more specific, General Hospital, an afternoon drama, was judged to be real by a majority of the second graders (55%). The developmental differences in response to the category of drama are displayed in Figure 3. In this analysis, 2nd graders differ significantly (p. <.05) from 4th, 6th graders and adults, the 4th graders differ significantly (p. <.05) from 6th graders and adults, and the 6th graders and adults are not significantly different.

-----insert Fig. 3 about here-----

Sitcoms were another area in which the youngest children had difficulty in distinguishing real from make-believe. In fact, they had the most problems with this category. Only 66% of the 2nd graders gave a correct identification when shown a bit from a situation comedy. Fourth graders also showed some confusion with this category, making it the one with the greatest developmental range of response. Only 80% of 4th graders made a correct judgement of sitcoms as make-believe. The 6th graders and adults, however, knew that these were fictional programs and

labeled them as such. The data for sitcoms is displayed in Figure 4. In this analysis, 2nd graders differ significantly (p. <.05) from 4th, 6th graders and adults, the 4th graders differ significantly (p. <.05) from 6th graders and adults, and the 6th graders and adults are not significantly different.

-----insert Fig. 4 about here-----

Finally, the "real entertainment" category included programs which are meant to be entertaining, but the people on them are real, they're talking about real things and they are not playing a role. An interesting developmental trend surfaced with this category. 80% of the 2nd graders, 87% of the 4th graders and 93% of the 6th graders categorized these programs correctly, as real, but only 89% of the adults called them real. This decline in correct judgements could be due to a shift in criteria from factual/fictional to realistic/unrealistic. The adults may have been telling us that these programs were unrealistic, even though they are also factual. Developmental data for the "real/entertainment" category are shown in Figure 5. In this analysis, 2nd and 4th graders are not significantly different, but 2nd graders are significantly different from 6th graders and adults (p. <.05). The 4th graders are signifcantly different (p. <.05) from 6th graders, but not from adults, and the 6th graders do differ significantly from adults (p. <.05).

-----insert Fig. 5 about here-----

In summary, compared to adults, 4th and 6th graders were significantly better than 2nd graders in making these reality/fantasy judgments. On the whole, 2nd graders were correct in their judgments, on

average, 83% of the time; 4th graders - 91%, 6th graders - 97%, and adults - 94%. The lower percentage of correct judgments from adults, as mentioned earlier, came about because adults judged several "real" bits as fictional, perhaps signaling their sense of the unrealistic nature of this material.

Discussion

These results suggest, in line with earlier literature, that while children have some ability to distinguish televised fact from fiction early in life, they appear to develop schema for understanding fantasy and "make-believe" before they come to understand the category of factual or "real." Judgments of reality are more difficult, take longer, and require a wider range of knowledge of the real world than judgments of "make-believe."

Children seem to learn first the distinction between fact and fiction, and even very young children can sort television into these two categories. The youngest children studied in earlier research (three year olds) have the most difficulty with fantasy, often calling things that are fantasy (such as a rabbit baking a cake) as real (Taylor and Howell, 1973). At the earlier ages, children make the distinction between fact and fiction on the basis of form cues such as animation (for fantasy) or a news format (for reality) (Wright, et al., 1987). Our findings confirm this.

As children reach the age of 7 or 8, they begin to rely more on the distinction between realistic and unrealistic rather than on the simpler distinction between fact and fiction made earlier (Dorr, 1983; Hawkins, 1977). The same effects are noted here, television that is more realistic

has greater effects than television that is unrealistic, but now the dimensions may cross the boundries of fact and fiction. That is, there may be television that is realistic but fictional, and there may be television that is factual but uncommon. This shift in thinking on the part of children in the range from 7-12 years is characterized by a decrease in the use of possibility and an increase in the use of probability as the basis of the criterion (Dorr, 1983; 1985; Morison, Kelly, and Gardner, 1981).

Thus rather than defining "real" as something that is possible, individuals at this final stage define real as that which is probable. Things that are probable are called "real" or "realistic" whereas things that are inprobable are called "unrealistic" or "fictional." This distinction is most clearly seen in the response of adults to the category of "real/entertainment" where shows like "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" and "Johnny Carson" are categorized as "make-believe" by adults and as "real" by children. It is notable that one team of researchers studying the way children reason about literature (rather than television) have found the same progression from possible to probable as a definition of the reality of a story (Landry, Kelly, and Gardner, 1982).

Future research on the topic of the perceived reality of television must investigate in more detail the shift from factuality to realism, and must establish what difference the distinction makes to both children and adults. There is evidence that the perceived reality of a television stimulus can influence attention and involvement, violent actions, and emotions. What other effects television perceived as real versus not real may have are open to question. But the topic is an important one not only

for what it may have to tell us about the nature of these two important cognitive dimensions, but also for research on mitigating the effects of television on children. If young children can be taught that much of television is not real, it may have less influence on them than it currently does.

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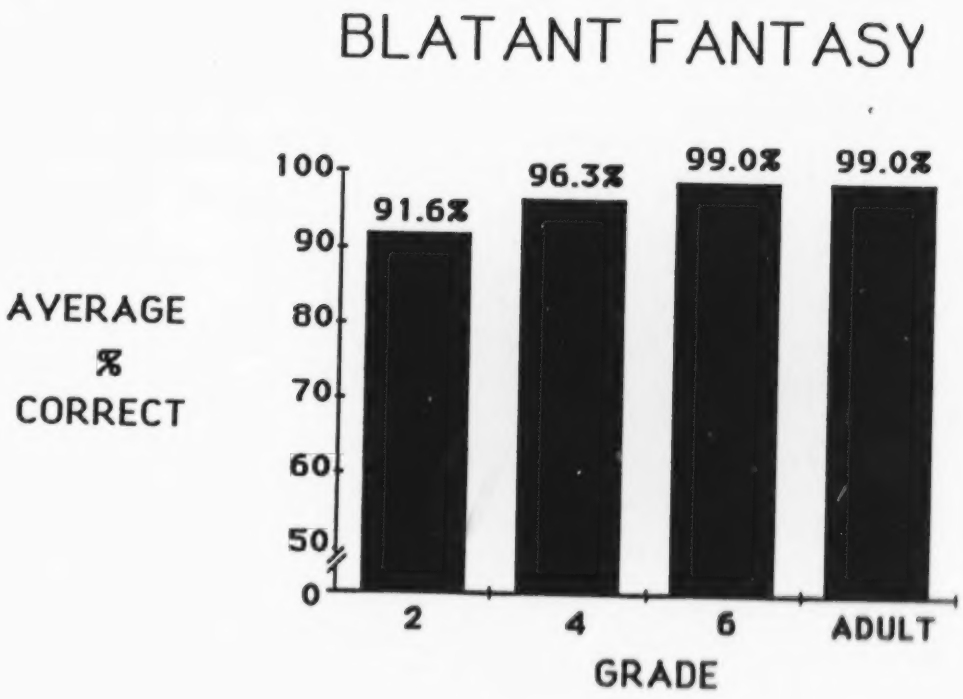
Footnotes

[1] Susan Freund is now at Children's Television Workshop, 1 Lincoln Plaza, New York, NY 10023.

[2] We thank Mr. John Stefano, principal of Dryden Elementary School, and Ms. Anderson, Ms. Downey, Ms. Lang, Ms Strong, Ms. Heatherington, Ms. Jahnke, Ms. Shapiro, and Ms. Evans, who graciously allowed us to use their classrooms for this research. Most of all we thank the children of these classrooms, too numerous to list, who participated as subjects in this study.

Figure 1

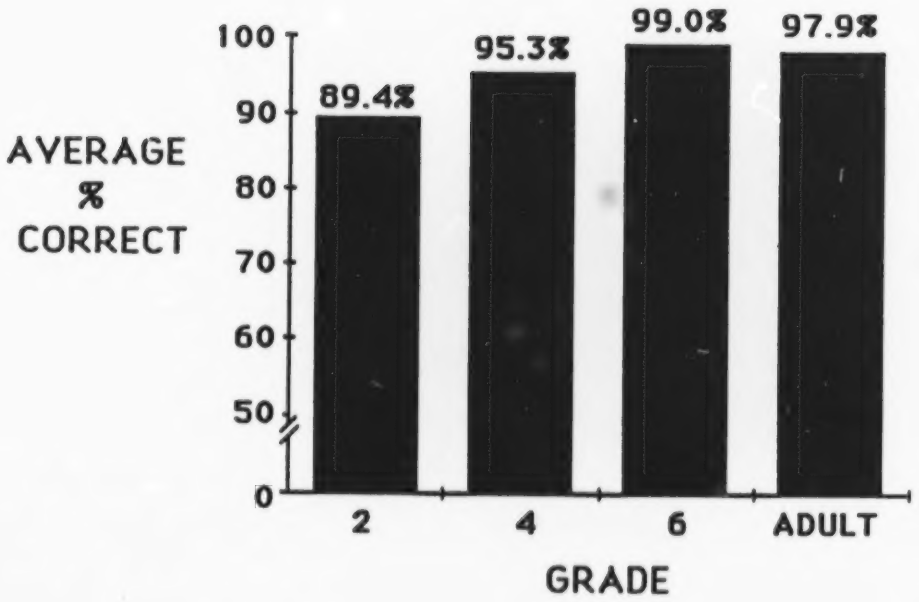


EXAMPLES

The Muppet Show
Wonder Woman

Figure 2

INFORMATIONAL

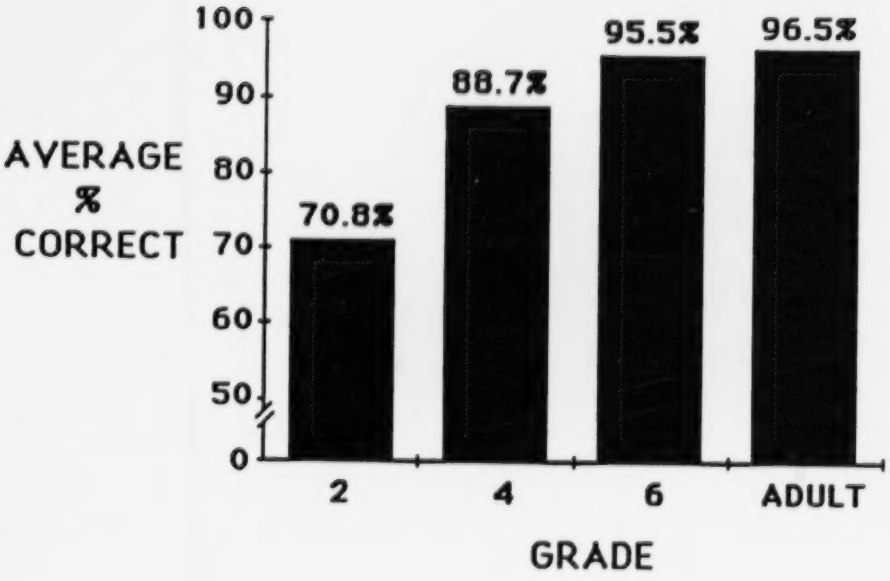


EXAMPLES

News
Wild Kingdom
The Body Human

Figure 3

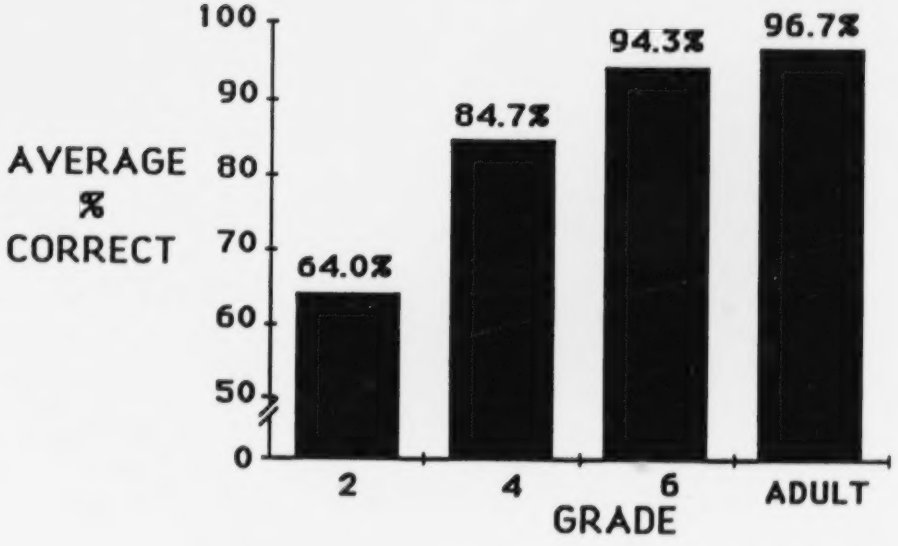
DRAMAS



EXAMPLES

General Hospital
Knots Landing
Trapper John, M.D.

Figure 4

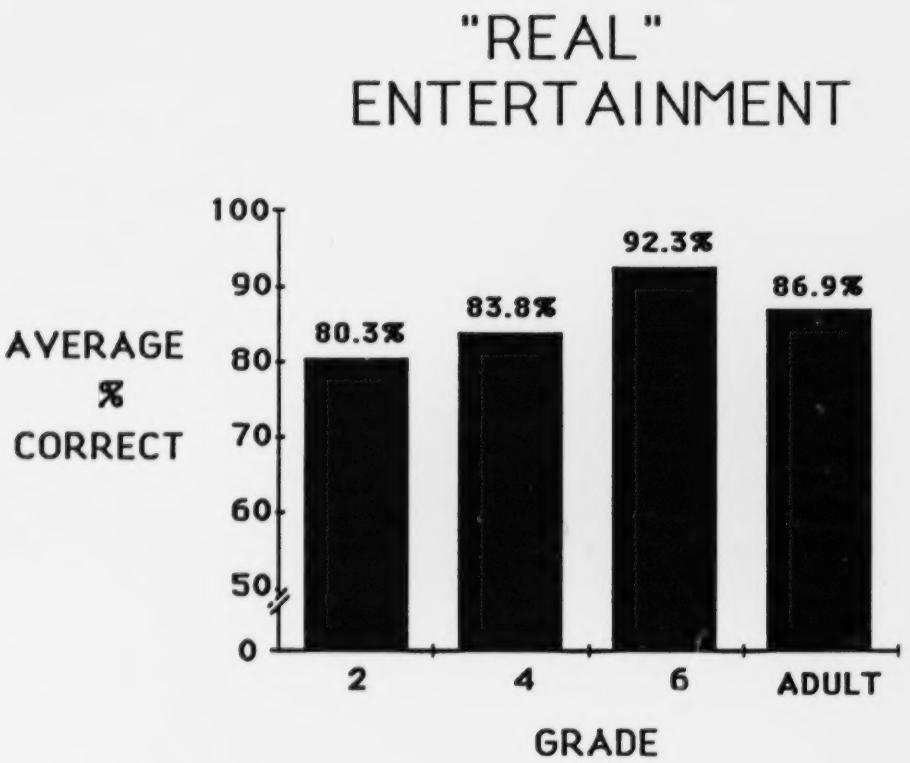


EXAMPLES

All in the Family

Cosby Show

Figure 5



EXAMPLES

Johnny Carson
Lifestyles of the Rich & Famous